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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000520

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

Department for EAP/BCLTV and DRL

1E. O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PGOV SOCI VM RELFREE HUMANR

SUBJECT: PROTESTANTS IN QUIET STAND OFF WITH POLICE OVER NEW HOUSE CHURCH

1. (SBU) A group of 50-100 Protestant believers has been working around the clock for two days to construct a new (unrecognized) branch church in HCMC, in defiance of local police and government officials. The situation has remained peaceful thus far, but at least one pastor on the scene has encouraged his followers to physically resist any attempts to stop construction or disperse the believers. Protestants working at the site say anywhere from 50 to 200 police and other local government officials have been present at various times during the construction. They accuse the government of employing undercover policemen and hired thugs in an attempt to provoke a confrontation. Police allegedly interfered with the shipment of construction materials -- taking custody of at least one vehicle, though after the supplies had been removed by the Protestant believers. Police have also allegedly warned local merchants not to sell to the group. In spite of this, construction of the prefabricated structure, which began at 5:00 am on June 9, is slated to be completed early on June 11 local time. Some pastors at the scene took the initiative, contacted a Time correspondent in Hanoi, and were interviewed by telephone today.

2. (SBU) According to regular ConGen contacts in the Protestant community, the new church is being constructed on a parcel of land in District 2 owned by a GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) pastor from District 9. The government ordered an earlier church on the same site demolished some years ago, after which the congregation continued to worship outdoors for several more months before the government finally clamped down completely. Local authorities have allegedly denied numerous written applications over the intervening years to build a new structure on this site. The reason given is that while the District 9 church has been recognized, a church on this District 2 parcel of land has neither been approved for construction nor as a "branch" of the older church. Post's contacts admit that officials at the ward level have apparently issued an order explicitly denying permission to build and authorizing local officials to remove any illegal construction. But they also claim that the HCMC People's Committee and Committee on Religious Affairs have recently given them some form of unwritten, informal consent to proceed.

3. (SBU) A Protestant pastor not directly associated with the new church told Poloff this evening that the law actually allows construction to begin if the government fails to respond to an application for a building permit within three weeks. ConGen is unable to verify this assertion at this time, but this could be the passive, informal "permission" on which these believers base their case. In the meantime, this same pastor believes the police are unlikely to crack down on such a large group out in the open. YAMAUCHI